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ABSTRACT

This study examined 10 kindergarten teachers' use of instructional time to determine its relationship to student learning. Data were collected through classroom observations of student time-on-task and teacher-student interactions at 3-minute intervals over the course of 2 half-hour sessions with each teacher and his or her pupils. It was found that, out of the 200 observational intervals, large group activities occurred 157 times and small group activities occurred 34 times. A total of 46 instances of unoccupied children were recorded, as well as 71 instances of time spent making transition from one activity to another. Though variation existed in student grouping, whole-group instruction was most common. As a result, teacher-student interaction was most frequent during whole group instruction. Findings suggest that developmentally appropriate practices may not be commonplace in kindergarten programs. (Contains 17 references.) (MDM)

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Observations of Instructional Time in Kindergarten Classrooms: Suggestions for Improvement

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Abstract

Variations in the manner in which teachers use instructional time can influence student learning. In this study kindergarten teachers' use of instructional time in a centralized kindergarten program in a school district in the Mid-South was analyzed. Eighteen 30 minute observations of 12 teachers were conducted during the Spring of 1993 through use of the Classroom Check List (CCL; Stallings, 1977). Interesting, 46 instances of unoccupied children were recorded (26%) as well as 71 instances of time spent in making a transition from one activity to another (39%). Though variation existed in student grouping, whole group instruction was most common. As a result, teacher-student interaction was most frequent during whole group instruction. Implications for classroom teachers in relation to developmentally appropriate practices are discussed.

Observations of Instructional Time in Kindergarten Classrooms: Suggestions for Improvement

The United States has a long history of kindergarten education. The first kindergarten classroom opened in 1856 and, by 1880, had spread throughout the United States (Bryant & Clifford, 1992). Though initially separate from public schools, kindergarten became part of public education. By becoming part of the public schools, the concept of kindergarten education lost some of its own identity and began to emphasize discipline and neatness (Bryant & Clifford, 1992) rather than developmentally appropriate practices.

Similar to arguments regarding elementary and secondary education curricula, educators have debated the best approach for kindergarten education. Whereas some educators argued for the strict use of materials, others believed that kindergarten should stress initiative and creativity (Bryant & Clifford, 1992). More recently, kindergarten programs have become "watered down" first grades (Cruikshank, 1986; Lawler, 1988; Spodek, 1984). That is, the academic curricula emphasized in the early elementary grades has filtered down into the kindergarten classrooms. This has occurred despite the recognition that young children may not be ready for academic material taught in standard instructional

formats (Elkind, 1986; Lawler & Vance, 1988; Lawler, 1990; Peck, McCaig, & Sapp, 1988).

Managing children's behavior is another important aspect of effective teaching in kindergarten. Generally, research indicates that more effective management is associated with a more substantive and structured focus, by high rates of academic feedback, and by maintaining continuous signals for appropriate behavior (Ellis, 1989; Emmer & Evertson, 1989; Evertson, Emmer, Clements, Sanford, & Worsham, 1989).

In response to concerns expressed about the inappropriateness of an academic curricula for kindergarten students, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, Bredekamp, 1990; Albrecht & Plantz, 1991) issued a set of guidelines referred to as Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) regarding children's learning and development. Several DAP guidelines are: (1) Children learn through active exploration and interaction with adults, peers, and materials; (2) Activities should challenge students mentally and physically; (3) Materials should provide concrete examples and be relevant to the child's world (Bredekamp, 1993).

Because DAP are directed toward age appropriate practices rather than the current emphasis on academic instruction, teaching

conducted in accordance with DAP should be reflected in the manner in which teachers use allocated instructional time (Bidne, 1989; Burts, Hart, Thomasson, Charlesworth, Fleege, & Mosley, 1990; Elkind, 1989). In this study, we analyzed how kindergarten teachers used instructional time in a centralized kindergarten program in a school district in the Mid-South.

Method

Eighteen 30 minute observations were conducted at a centralized kindergarten program in Northeast Arkansas during the Spring semester of 1993. Ten teachers were observed a total of 60 minutes each. All data were collected between January 1993 and April 1993 by the senior author and a graduate student in early childhood education. Data were recorded at three minute intervals through use of the Classroom Check List (CCL; Stallings, 1977). The CCL, a standardized observational procedure for teachers/classrooms in early elementary grades, consists of 22 rows of possible activities and 4 columns regarding number of children participating. Multiple entries can be made at the three minute intervals. Specifically noted at each three minute interval in this study were: 1) the activity in which students were involved; 2) whether students were working independently, in small groups, or with the teacher; 3) materials in use; 4) number

of teachers in the classroom; 5) whether the teachers were interacting with students; and, 6) the specific nature of the teacher's behavior.

All classes observed in this study were similar in composition. That is, one teacher was assigned to each class, with two classes having student teachers designated to them. Class sizes varied from 16 to 20 students per class. The arrangement of the rooms were also similar. All teachers conducted their unit time and group time on the floor with the students sitting in a circle around them. Worksheets as well as "hands on" projects were completed at student tables, with the majority of students seated in groups.

Results

Out of the 200 observation intervals (i.e., 10 three minute intervals in each of 20 observation sessions) in which data were recorded, large group activities occurred 157 times (78.5%) and small group activities occurred 34 times (17%). Interesting, 46 instances of unoccupied children were recorded, 26 of which occurred during large group instruction and 13 of which occurred during small group instruction. Being unoccupied was more than twice as likely during small group instruction (38%) than during large group instruction (17%). Although all 10 teachers held

large group activities, 2 teachers did not engage in small group activities with their students during the observation sessions.

Table 1 indicates that, in addition to large and small group activities, numerous transitions (n = 71; 35.5%) from one activity to another occurred. Also, 20 instances of classroom management (10%) were recorded. Although teachers are encouraged to interact with young students, social interaction was noted as occurring only 5 out of 200 possible intervals (2.5%). Interactions between students and teachers were noted with only 3 of our 10 teachers.

Insert Table 1 about here

Discussion

Our findings suggest that developmentally appropriate practices may not be commonplace in kindergarten programs (Elkind, 1986; Lawler & Vance, 1988; Lawler, 1990; Peck, McCaig, & Sapp, 1988). Even though interaction between teacher and students is encouraged as part of DAP, we found that our teachers interacted with their students only 2.5% of the time. Large groups, commonplace in traditional instructional practices, were the predominant instructional grouping in our study. Small groups, believed to be more conducive to the needs of young children

(Bredekamp, 1990; Bredekamp, 1993), occurred less than one-fifth of the time.

Additionally, during small group instruction students were unoccupied 35% of the time. This finding indicates lack of classroom management during small group instruction. Because 20 instances of classroom management were recorded, this study determined that the observed kindergarten teachers spent a great deal of their instructional time in classroom management.

Readers are cautioned against overgeneralizing from our findings for two reasons. First, our sample of kindergarten students and teachers was from a geographically restricted area (i.e., the Mississippi Delta) and from only one kindergarten center. Second, our observational data was limited to 60 minutes per teacher. To ascertain the generalizability of our findings, further research is necessary.

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Table 1

Most Frequently Occurring Categories.

Category	n	Percentage of Time
Large group instruction	157	78.5
Small group instruction	34	17.0
Transition activities	71	35.5
Classroom management	20	10.0
Unoccupied children	46	23.0
during large group instruction	26	16.6
during small group instruction	13	38.2
Social Interaction	5	2.5